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‘Sex, drugs and snowboarding’: (il)legitimate definitions of taste and lifestyle in a physical youth culture

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This paper examines the hedonistic social interactions and lifestyles embraced by many contemporary physical youth cultural participants via the case of snowboarding. Drawing upon an array of primary and secondary sources collected over seven years, I present a three-part analysis of the hedonistic party lifestyle, alcohol and drug consumption (for both pleasure and performance), and the hyper-sexuality, at the core of the snowboarding culture. Engaging Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, and particularly his concepts of field, practice and taste, in dialogue with my empirical evidence, I reveal the definitions of pleasure and the hedonistic snowboarding lifestyle as highly contested. While many cultural participants are complicit to hierarchical and/or violent attempts to regulate the dominant tastes and practices within the snowboarding field, others are engaging in an array of symbolic and embodied struggles to (re)define meanings of ‘pleasure’ in the snowboarding lifestyle and aprés snow culture more broadly.

Keywords: lifestyle; youth culture; snowboarding; Bourdieu; pleasure

Snowboarder’s [sic] party, that’s a fact. When you think about it, it’s composed of a counter culture of alternative people who tend to resist social norms. At certain snowboarding events and contests, all these people are grouped together and the wheels fall off. ... Sometimes things get broken, sometimes you forget to sleep, and sometimes you’re forced to sleep in jail. (Eric, professional Canadian snowboarder, personal communication, 2008)

For many people, snowboarding is associated with letting your hair down, going away to the mountains, to a foreign country, and trying something new. ... Boarders often get drunk and naked and then climb trees in places like Whistler. I’ve seen people running around naked, trying to see how many hot tubs they can get into without getting busted. (Jenny Jones, British Olympic snowboarder, cited in Thompson, 2006, para. 25)

If I’m sitting there getting ready to hit a rail, my mind goes crazy if I’m not stoned. It makes you relax and get into the groove. I won’t even go snowboarding if I’m not stoned. I get bored with it. (Nate Bozung, professional US snowboarder, cited in Higgins, 2010, para. 33)

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Since the late 1980s, the relationship between sensation-seeking personalities, extreme and lifestyle sports, and risk-taking in various outdoor environments (e.g. mountains, oceans and rivers) has increasingly gained attention from psychologists and social scientists (see Self, Henry, Findley, & Reilly, 2007; Wagner & Houlihan, 1994). Somewhat surprisingly, however, the hedonistic behaviours of participants in bars, nightclubs, and other cultural spaces have gone largely ignored. Although rarely discussed in the literature, the lifestyles of many committed extreme or action sport participants (e.g. skateboarders, surfers and snowboarders) have long been and continue to be organised around highly festive social gatherings where the consumption of alcohol and recreational drugs is often widespread. In this paper, I examine the hedonistic social interactions and lifestyles embraced by (some) contemporary physical youth cultural participants via the case of snowboarding.

Snowboarding, as we understand the activity today, emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in North America. The popularisation of the Malibu surf-board and the escapism and hedonism of surfing, with its anti-establishment counter-cultural values and do-it-yourself philosophies, inspired many of the early snowboarders (see Anderson, 1999; Humphreys, 1997; Heino, 2000; Thorpe, 2007a). Terje Haakonsen, a snowboarder of legendary status, best captured the counter-cultural ideology among early boarders when he described snowboarding as about making ‘fresh tracks and carving powder and being yourself’ rather than ‘nationalism and politics and big money’ (cited in Lidz, 1997, p. 114). During the mid and late 1990s, however, snowboarding was exposed to international audiences via mass-mediated events, such as the X Games, Gravity Games and Winter Olympics, and increasingly attracted an influx of participants from around the world and from different social classes and age groups. Although reliable international statistics are rare, recent estimates suggest that there are currently more than 70 million snowboarders worldwide with participants ranging from novice to expert, and from 5 to 75 years of age (Wark, 2009). Despite shifting cultural demographics the image of the young, hedonistic, rebellious snowboarder continues to loom large in the public imagination. Indeed, with more than 75% of snowboarders still under the age of 24, and the majority being white and from the middle and upper classes (‘Action Sports’, 2007; NGSA, 2001), young, privileged men and women continue to constitute a dominant force at the core of the culture; many of these participants celebrate similar counter-cultural ethos expressed by the early pioneers. In this paper, I focus primarily on the pleasure-seeking practices and performances of ‘core’ snowboarders in the après snow culture, as well as the growing popularity of this lifestyle among middle-class snow-sport tourists.

This paper consists of two main sections. First, I offer some brief comments on the methodological and theoretical approach underpinning this study. Second, I offer a three-part thematic analysis of the hedonistic party lifestyle, alcohol and drug consumption (for both pleasure and performance), and the hyper-sexuality, in the après snow culture. In each of the three themes, I reveal various pleasure-seeking practices observed within and across local snowboarding cultures, as well as some of the tensions that develop between groups with different understandings of what constitutes (il)legitimate lifestyle tastes. The focus of this discussion is on the hedonistic practices of snowboarders, particularly highly committed or ‘core’ snowboarders, the majority of whom are in their late teens and twenties. Yet, some of the observations can also be applied to young skiers who share similar lifestyles and taste practices to their snowboarding peers.
Researching pleasure and power in contemporary physical youth culture

This paper is part of a larger project in which I set out to understand the global phenomena of snowboarding culture (Thorpe, 2011). Between 2004 and 2010, I conducted fifteen ‘ethnographic visits’ (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002) – ranging from one week to one month – in an array of snowboarding communities and ski resorts in Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, Switzerland and the USA. In conjunction with my multi-sited transnational fieldwork, I also conducted interviews with 60 snowboarders ranging from novice to Olympic athletes, and gathered evidence from a plethora of cultural sources and artefacts, including magazines, websites, newspapers, videos, internet chat rooms, promotional material, television programs, and reports from sporting organisations and associated industries. The prolonged nature of this project allowed me to observe cultural change and provided time for reflection on the data gathered and my conceptual interpretations. Indeed, as my theoretical understandings developed and my position within the culture changed (from semi-professional athlete to highly committed ‘insider’ to occasional recreational participant), I continued to ask new questions of my observations and experiences (see Thorpe, Barbour, & Bruce, 2011). In late 2007, following a conversation with a barista in a local cafe in which he proclaimed, ‘Oh cool, you’re writing a book about snowboarding. I hope you’ve got a chapter on drinking, drugs and partying’, I revisited my original data (i.e. field notes, interview transcripts and cultural artefacts) from a different theoretical and cultural perspective, and temporal context. In so doing, I recognised that although I tacitly understood snowboarders’ hedonistic practices and performances in the après snow culture as integral to the lifestyle, this remained an underdeveloped aspect of my research.4

Seeking to further understand the complex relations between risk, power, pleasure, play, and performance in the après snow culture, I conducted follow-up interviews with six key informants (three women and three men) ranging from 27 to 35 years of age, all of whom had spent many (3 to 12) years immersed in the snowboarding lifestyle both locally and internationally. Participants were asked to reflect on their beliefs, observations and experiences in the après snow culture, including drug and alcohol consumption, and sex and sexuality.5 These in-depth follow-up interviews enabled me to refine and develop the analytical themes that had emerged during my initial phases of fieldwork, as well as produce new areas of enquiry which were then explored further during subsequent phases of fieldwork. For consistency across the project, I employed similar methods across all ethnographic sites. During the later phases of fieldwork, however, I more actively sought out locations in which the après snow culture was most visible and accessible (i.e. bars and nightclubs, cafes, prize-giving events, video premiers, snowboard shops and local hangouts), as well as highly festive snowboarding events and competitions (i.e. the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, the first European Winter X Games in France in March 2010, and the Freeze Festival held in London in October 2010).6

The multi-method ethnographic approach employed in this study helped deepen my understanding of the cultural complexities of the hedonistic snowboarding lifestyle. Importantly, theory also played a fundamental role in enhancing my interpretation of this evidence.7

According to Coveney and Bunton (2003), ‘by examining the ways that pleasures are represented and experienced we can also examine some of the ways that power and social relations are reproduced’ (p. 174; also see Bramham & Wagg,
In this paper I engage my empirical evidence in dialogue with French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, and particularly his key concepts of field and taste, to examine some of the hedonistic practices of snowboarders, and the efforts by various groups to control, regulate, and define the legitimate tastes and consumption practices in the après snow culture. According to Bourdieu (1984), every class and its factions have distinct tastes or preferences for cultural goods and consumption ranging from food and drinks, to art, clothing, and holiday destinations. Taste, Bourdieu (1984) observes, ‘unites and separates’ these classes or groups:

It unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from others. And it distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others. (p. 56)

Taste – the practical dimension of lifestyle – not only plays an important role in identifying social groups but also functions to accommodate and reinforce the existing structure of the social space or field (Turner, 1988). Social fields often have unique valuation systems privileging different forms of capital (i.e. cultural, symbolic, economic, and physical), as well as distinct taste practices and strategies for accessing capital. Within various social fields, individuals and groups or classes struggle to define, transform or preserve culturally valued taste practices, and thus the configuration of power or capital. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, practice and taste, I reveal that the definitions of pleasure differ within and across social fields, which in some cases lead to tensions and attempts by dominant groups (both within and outside the snowboarding field) to regulate snowboarders’ taste practices. I also examine multiple forms of power operating on and through snowboarding bodies within the après snow field based on various social divisions including gender, sexuality and age. In so doing, this paper supports Coveney and Bunton’s (2003) suggestion that, ‘while the discourses and experience of pleasure are normally associated with freedom from interdiction’, they are in fact ‘replete with social regulation or control’ (p. 174).

**Sex, drugs and snowboarding: pleasure-seeking in the après snow culture**

The consumption of skiing holidays in exclusive mountain resort destinations, such as Chamonix (France), Zermatt (Switzerland), and Aspen (Colorado), has long been a practice of distinction among the upper classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Drinking and social festivities have always been an integral part of the après snow culture (Coleman, 2004). While some (typically younger) skiers have been indulging in hedonistic, deviant, pleasure-seeking lifestyles since the 1950s, these consumption practices were largely consistent with upper-class taste preferences (e.g. drinking aged whisky or fine wine in restaurants, rather than excessive amounts of cheap beer or ‘alcopops’ in budget accommodation or in the streets). Recent changes in the ski industry and international travel, however, have contributed to shifts in the social demographics of snow-sport tourists. During the 1990s and early 2000s, ski-fields and mountain resort destinations recognised snowboarding as offering the industry a new youth market and potential for ongoing economic prosperity. Attempting to further attract regional, national and international snowboarding patrons, many (not all)
resort destinations began offering cheaper travel and accommodation options for the typically younger and less affluent (though still privileged) snowboarder, as well as developing unique events for niche groups (e.g. snowboarding competitions for university students, women’s snowboarding clinics, gay ski and snowboard weeks). Many travel companies also realised the economic potential in snowboarding tourism and began offering a wide range of snow-sport travel options (e.g. budget or back-packers, long-weekend student deals, and all-inclusive family packages) (Thorpe, 2010a). Thus, ski resorts and mountain destinations, once the exclusive domain of upper-class skiers, are increasingly being shared by skiers and snowboarders from the middle and upper classes, and various nationalities and age groups, and from different positions within these physical cultures (e.g. professional athletes, core cultural participants, tourists, novices and poseurs). Responding to these trends, many ski resort destinations now offer a plethora of opportunities for tourists and snow-sport enthusiasts – skiers and snowboarders – to engage in pleasurable social interactions and experiences in various cafes, bars and nightclubs, as well as other social spaces (e.g. snow-sport events, competitions, apartments or houses, backpackers, and hotels), such that they have become highly complex places of play, pleasure, and performance (Frohlick, 2003; Sheller & Urry, 2004).

All ski resort destinations visited during my fieldwork could be described as ‘liminal spaces’, offering tourists ‘brief moments of freedom and an escape from the daily grind of social responsibilities’ (Preston-White, 2004, p. 350). In a similar way that the beach has been described as a liminal place ‘in between, neither land nor sea, where the normal social conventions need not apply’, and the seaside resort has been identified as a ‘ludic and unconventional site’ shaped by ‘discourses of hedonism, anonymity and adventure’ (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2009, p. 263; Pritchard & Morgan, 2010; also see Ford & Brown, 2006), ski resorts also have their own rule systems and the après snow culture offers many snow-sport tourists a liminal space outside of the norms of everyday life and seemingly beyond ‘real’ consequence. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that some snow-sport tourists ‘get drunk and naked and then climb trees’ while holidaying in liminal ‘places like Whistler’ (see Jenny Jones’ comments at the head of the article). Many ski resort destinations are also highly dynamic, transnational fields attracting participants from various nationalities. While many are drawn to these sites by the desire to experience new, more challenging, or culturally infamous terrain, others are attracted by the opportunities for social interactions with like-minded snow-sport enthusiasts. The constant flow of tourists and ‘lifestyle sport migrants’ (Thorpe, 2010a) through these spaces further contributes to the sense of anonymity, temporality, and thus liminality. Of course, those living permanently (or semi-permanently) in ski resort destinations have different understandings of these locations – as ‘home’ rather than a holiday destination – which can prompt some conflict between groups (e.g. tourists, local residents, and seasonal migrants) (see Duncan, 2008, 2009; Thorpe, 2011).

It is beyond the scope, and not the intention, of this paper to explore the unique global and local mobilities and interactions of snow-sport tourists, and seasonal and long-term residents, within each transnational mountain resort field. Rather, I present three key themes that emerged from my multi-sited ethnographic research. First, I describe snowboarding competitions and events as celebrations of the ‘ride hard, party hard’ ethos at the core of the snowboarding culture. Second, I examine the cultural politics of drug use for pleasure and performance within the (not always compatible) fields of snowboarding and high performance sport. Third, I comment
on the complex relationship between physical prowess and heterosexuality in the après snow culture, and attempts by dominant groups to regulate legitimate forms of sexuality. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s concepts of field, taste, and practice, in each part I reveal some of the embodied and symbolic struggles between individuals and groups to (re)define legitimate understandings of pleasure in snowboarding culture.

‘Ride hard, party hard’: pleasure, power, and the hedonistic snowboarding lifestyle

Modern competitive snowboarding began in 1981 with the first American national titles held at Suicide Six (Vermont); the following year, the resort hosted the first international snowboard race. Organised primarily as social gatherings, many of the early events privileged participation over competition. According to pioneer Tom Sims, almost everyone attending the early snowboarding races was ‘drunk and disorderly, and really just there to revel in the rarity of an occasion that made snowboarding seem like a real culture with more than a few members’ (cited in Howe, 1998, p. 43). An early core New Zealand snowboarder, Phillipa, also recalls the festive nature of these events:

Partying after competitions was always a highlight – the video clip and music of the event made the whole day seem larger than life. We always got drunk, it was pretty easy after the mental and physical exertion of the day – and we were always amongst great friends. Everyone took it to different levels – but the common thread was that of ‘riding hard – partying hard’. (Personal communication, 2008)

The following excerpt from professional US snowboarder Todd Richards’ (2003) autobiography further highlights the excessive alcohol consumption and juvenile humour and pranks prevalent at many post-competition parties:

The secret was to pick the weakest animal in the herd and then patiently wait for him to drink himself to oblivion. After he passed out, someone would generally say a prayer to the effect of, ‘God help him.’ Then we would move in like hyenas ... Empty beer cans and beer bottles would be shoved ceremoniously down the victim’s pants, honey massaged into his hair, and by the time we’d finished, his entire face, eyebrows, neck, and other exposed skin would be covered in ‘non-toxic’ ink. (p. 176)

Despite claims from early snowboarders that these events embraced an inclusive ideology, access was typically limited to active participants, their close friends, and other highly committed lifestyle sport enthusiasts. A select few privileged youth defined the legitimate taste and lifestyle practices in the early snowboarding field, and in so doing, regulated access to the ‘core’ of the culture.

Participation in the hedonistic lifestyle was (and continues to be) intimately connected to notions of cultural commitment and authenticity, identity, and belonging. It is typically through the process of enculturation into local snowboarding groups that participants learn the unique cultural values and ‘rules’ of the snowboarding culture and lifestyle, and the ‘consequences’ of breaking these rules (e.g. falling asleep at a party may result in ritualistic acts of public humiliation), as well as the identities of individuals or groups who reinforce the valuation system and cultural hierarchy (e.g. ‘weakest animal’) in the snowboarding field. For some, the enculturation into the core of the snowboarding culture is experienced as a (sometimes
violent) ‘rite of passage’. For example, at a party in a ski resort destination in Oregon (USA), I was witness to a homemade video played for the entertainment of the guests. The video featured three boys, between the ages of 11–13, being forced to drink excessive amounts of alcohol by a group of older male snowboarders, who were supposed to be their caregivers and coaches for the weekend. These boys were then exposed to a variety of demeaning pranks, which included being stripped to their underpants, violently pushed into cold showers, and then locked in dark rooms in separate parts of the house. Initially, the boys saw the humour in the activities and seemed to be enjoying the attention the older men were paying them but, by the end of the video, they appeared genuinely terrified. While watching the videotape, the perpetrators of this dehumanising and violent behaviour laughed and joked that these ‘spoilt brats’ deserved such treatment; the majority of the partygoers also saw the humour in this hazing ritual. This example is illustrative of the various covert and overt strategies employed by some young men (and some women) to define the legitimate tastes (for excessive alcohol consumption) within the culture and thus reinforce the hierarchical structure of the snowboarding field; many others are complicit to these practices. During his early snowboarding career, Gavin experienced similar ‘initiation’ practices to those described above, and today accepts such practices as ‘a rite of passage that we all experience’ (personal communication, 2006). Bourdieu (1984) uses the term ‘symbolic violence’ to describe the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. This has been achieved through a process Bourdieu calls ‘misrecognition’, whereby ‘power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (Jenkins, 1992, p. 104).

The media also played a decisive role in structuring the snowboarding field, by confirming, spreading, and consolidating culturally and socially valuable styles and tastes across local and national snowboarding fields. During the 1990s, the hedonistic, drunken and disorderly exploits of early professional male snowboarders were widely endorsed in snowboarding niche media (e.g. magazines and films). For example, established in 1993, Blunt magazine had more cultural authenticity among core snowboarders than any other magazine because it was seen as providing a ‘truthful’ representation of the snowboarding lifestyle (see Thorpe, 2011). Early professional snowboarder Richards (2003) describes the Blunt formula as ‘alcohol, party, party, party, oh, and snowboarding’, and adds, ‘it was really popular among snowboarders and really unpopular among ski resorts, parents, and snowboarding companies because of its blatant disregard for authority’ (p. 162). Despite Blunt’s appeal to core snowboarders, the hedonistic lifestyle celebrated in the magazine challenged authorities within the snowboarding industry, particularly those snowboarding organisations (e.g. United States of America Snowboarding Association [USASA] and the International Ski Federation [FIS]) that were actively promoting snowboarding as a legitimate sport, and touting participants as ‘responsible athletes’ in the lead up to the 1998 winter Olympics (see Humphreys, 1996). In 1998, Blunt folded under political and economic duress, thus offering an example of what Bourdieu (1998) refers to as ‘invisible censorship’ in which some forms of media and/or art – particularly those that challenge the taste preferences of dominant groups – become subject to the mechanisms of censorship and classification.

Despite many attempts by cultural outsiders to regulate the snowboarding lifestyle, the ‘ride hard, party hard’ discourse continues to pervade the contemporary
snowboarding culture and industry. Interestingly, some professional snowboarders are very aware of the commercial value of the sport’s counter-cultural past and hedonistic image. Downplaying the professionalism of the sport, many attempt to maintain a persona that is part snowboarding larrikin and part professional athlete. In interviews in mass and niche media, for example, some professional snowboarders continue to emphasise their hedonistic and party lifestyle, disregard for authority, heterosexual pursuits, and high jinks. In *Snowboarder* magazine, professional snowboarder Romain DeMarchi reveals that he has a ‘bad boy image’ for being ‘a hard-core partier’ and admits he has been arrested four times. DeMarchi is well aware of the economic value of a distinctly ‘extreme’ personality (particularly one that makes links to snowboarding’s history of rebellion) within the highly competitive field of professional snowboarding: ‘People say, “Ah, Romain’s the wild guy, he’s going to go out and rage his ass off and be a f—ker and a dickhead!”’ But you know, who cares if these things are said? People label me as crazy, and it’s good for me. It sells, so the sponsors use it and the magazines use it’ (Bridges 2004, p. 101).

Yet not all professional snowboarders accept the cultural norms and values regarding the hedonistic après snow lifestyle, and some refuse to engage in some taste practices. For example, while Australian Olympic gold-medallist snowboarder, Torah Bright, enjoys socialising and dancing at snowboarding parties, as a devout Mormon she has never partaken in the more salacious offerings at these events: ‘I’d never really wanted to [drink or smoke], so that’s been easy for me’, explains Bright (cited in Karnikowski, 2010, para. 7). Continuing, however, she describes the ‘constant battle’ with her peers who regularly tempt and taunt her: ‘We’ll break you one day, Torah. We’ll get you’ (cited in Karnikowski, 2010, para. 7). As Bright’s comments suggest, committed participants who choose (for whatever reason) not to drink alcohol and/or consume recreational drugs at social events and post-competition parties must employ an array of strategies to navigate the hyper-hedonistic (and sometimes illegal) practices ever-present in the snowboarding sport and lifestyle. Within the broader snowboarding culture, some participants have also created alternative spaces (typically on the margins of the field), such as alcohol- and drug-free snowboarding groups (see, e.g. www.ridersagainstdrugs.org). In so doing, these snowboarders are practising ‘regulated liberties’ (Bourdieu, 1991), that is, small exercises of power that arise in the context of the existing social order. While such practices may challenge the dominant cultural value system within a particular field, they take place from ‘within the dominant context’ and thus rarely ‘subvert those structures’ (Chambers, 2005, p. 339).

In contrast to early snowboarding competitions that were organised primarily for the enjoyment of core participants, many contemporary competitions are designed as spectator events for young consumers. Blurring the boundaries between music festival and sporting event, many snowboard competitions offer a ‘sense of carnival’ for both spectators and athletes (Rinehart, 2008, p. 184). Posters for the 2006 UK National Championships held in Laax (Switzerland), for example, read: ‘Snow loving, Freestyle Junkies with Party Streak Wanted’. Many big air competitions are held at night on purposefully built jumps in urban environments, either in mountain towns or in urban metropolis, and accompanied by live music and various other forms of entertainment (e.g. fashion shows and dancers). Many such events attract tens of thousands of, often highly intoxicated, spectators. Interestingly, even the snowboarding events at the 2010 Winter Olympics embraced a sense of carnival by
including live graffiti art displays, break-dancers, and beat-boxers performing in the stands, live DJs and bands during breaks in competition, interviews with snowboarding pioneers, as well as Olympic snowboarding video game competitions between audience members (field notes, February 2010; also see Thorpe & Wheaton, in press). One journalist attributed the success of the Vancouver Olympics to the ‘jazzed-up formats’ of events such as the snowboarding half-pipe and snowboard-cross which, drawing upon the ‘the razzmatazz and street credibility of the X Games’, transformed the ‘sometimes stuffy Olympic arena’ into a ‘party atmosphere’ (Booth, 2010, para. 3 and para. 11).

The excessive alcohol consumption of young snow-sport enthusiasts (many of whom are snowboarders) at these events, and in the après snow culture of ski resort destinations more broadly, is increasingly gaining the attention of local councils, national agencies, ski resort organisations, and the mass media, as well as insurance companies. A recent study by the British Foreign Ministry, for example, estimated that at least one third of skiers and snowboarders under the age of 25 had experienced problems abroad linked to a mixture of altitude, adrenaline and alcohol (Bradley, 2010). A poll conducted by ‘More Than Travel’ insurance company also found that British winter sports enthusiasts have on average seven units of alcohol still in their blood stream when they arrive on the slopes in the morning (this is the equivalent of being almost twice over the legal drink-drive limit in the UK) (Bradley, 2010). An Australian study, conducted by the New South Wales Health Service, found that of the 1084 young adult snowfield resort visitors surveyed, 56% had consumed 11 or more standard alcoholic drinks on the previous night, 65% reported having less than four hours sleep, and 77% had used psycho-stimulants in the previous 24 hours (see Sherker, Finch, Kehoe, & Doverty, 2006).

It is perhaps not surprising then that the mountain environment and après snow culture carries risks with potentially serious consequences for some snow-sport tourists, core snowboarders (and skiers), and professional athletes (e.g. criminal charges, serious injury and death). For example, Jeff Anderson – a talented 22-year old professional US snowboarder – died from head injuries sustained during a late-night stunt after a competition in Nagano (Japan). Staying at the same hotel with Anderson when the incident occurred, Richards (2003) recalls: ‘He was out with his buddies, drinking, having a good time. ... Jeff had been doing what all of us have done at some time in our lives: sliding down the hotel’s exterior stair banister on his butt. But lost his balance and fell over backwards four stories to the ground below. ... The grief was so close and so overwhelming...’ (p. 278). Continuing, he reflects critically upon the dangers faced by young snowboarders in the après snow culture: ‘I thought about the things I’d done when I was just screwing around [at] twenty-two [years old]. I got away with crazy things, but I was lucky’ (p. 278).

In response to an increasing number of accidents involving skiers and snowboarders under the ‘strong influence of alcohol’, the British Consulate General in Geneva launched a campaign in an array of snow-resort destinations in France, Italy and Switzerland to educate ‘young British nationals who perhaps are not fully aware of the effects of low temperatures and how the body reacts to alcohol at altitude’ (Bradley, 2010, para. 5). While dominant groups regularly attempt to police and regulate the tastes of others, Bourdieu (1984) is careful to remind us that such practices rarely go unchallenged. The Deputy Director of the Verbier (France) tourist office, Pierre-Yves Delèze, for example, proclaimed, ‘I have difficulty understanding the campaign. It’s part of that nanny state trend to want to control and protect...’
everything’ (cited in Bradley, 2010, para. 3); many snow-sport tourists and snowboarders expressed similar opinions on website forums and various other social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter).

As previously explained, alcohol-fuelled festivities are not a new phenomenon in ski resort destinations; skiers have long enjoyed engaging in hedonistic and socially deviant practices on and off the slopes. But as ski resort destinations have become more ‘complex, multi-dimensional and multiply inhabited’ fields (Jackson, Crang, & Dwyer, 2004, p. 3) where skiers and snowboarders from various classes, nationalities and age groups share the same social spaces (i.e. car parks, slopes, cafes and restaurants, bars and nightclubs), they have increasingly become sites of tension in which individuals and groups struggle for territory and eminence. As Bourdieu (1984) has explained, it is typically those who possess large amounts of economic or cultural capital (or both) who occupy ‘dominant’ positions in a particular social field and will seek to impose a hierarchy of taste on those with less capital. In some ski resort destinations, local (and national) authorities are seeking to control and regulate the tastes of young middle-class snow-sport tourists, and particularly where, when, and how young snowboarders (and skiers) participate in the après snow scene. While some groups certainly have more space to define and redefine cultural meanings pertaining to legitimate (and legal) taste practices within the après snow culture, the rules structuring mountain resort destinations are not fixed but inherently contested by those within local fields.

‘Riding high’: the cultural politics of drug use for pleasure and performance

While the alcohol consumption of young snowboarders and snow-sport tourists has recently drawn the attention of the mass media and various social agencies, the relationship between snowboarders and recreational drug use is more firmly etched in the public imagination. According to an ESPN journalist, ‘from decriminalization of marijuana in [some] mountain towns, to positive drug tests at the Winter Olympics ... snowboarding seems to embrace stoner sensibilities’ (Higgins, 2010, para. 2). Editor of Snowboarder Magazine, Pat Bridges, confirms: ‘Marijuana is a part of snowboarding culture’ (cited in Higgins, 2010, para. 3).

While most snowboarders accept the prevalence of marijuana within the après snow culture, their opinions are divided on the use of the drug while on the mountain. According to one male Canadian snowboard instructor: ‘Smoking a bowl [of marijuana] before riding puts me in the zone and I like the sensation of cruising when I’m stoned’ (cited in Baldwin, 2006, para. 9). For many others, snowboarding under the influence of marijuana compromises both safety and the overall psychophysical experience: ‘snowboarding after smoking weed ... makes me feel blinkered’, adding ‘I prefer to ride with a clear head ... and to be totally aware of my surroundings’ (Core Australian male snowboarder, cited in Baldwin, 2006, para. 13). Such debates continue to be hotly contested on website forums, in magazine editorial sections, and everyday conversations between boarders.

Interviews with core snowboarders for this project not only confirmed my observations regarding the use of marijuana by snowboarders both on and off the mountain, but also pointed to the prevalence of other recreational drugs in the après-snow culture (i.e. ecstasy, cocaine, speed), as well as a ‘pain-killer culture’ among some groups of core snowboarders:
There is a fair amount of marijuana in surfing, skating, and snowboarding. . . . It’s a popular drug with people who are creative. All mountain tourist towns usually have their share of party drugs too . . . ecstasy, speed, cocaine . . . But what I really couldn’t get my head around was the whole pain-killer culture. I used to see a lot of Japanese riders washing down a few [painkillers] at the start of each day. I suspect there was a bit of fashion to it. (New Zealand male snowboarder, personal communication, 2008)

When I was training and competing in the early 1990s I knew a few guys who . . . would be in the trees [smoking weed] during training three or four times a day . . . it relaxed them enough to go fast . . . Other guys were basically addicted to Ibuprofen, anti-inflammatory drugs, for various ailments. (Ex-professional female snowboarder, personal communication, 2008)

The second comment alludes to another heavily contested topic within the snowboarding culture, snow-sport industry, and anti-doping agencies, that is, the performance-enhancing capabilities of marijuana for elite athletes.

When Canadian snowboarder Ross Rebagliati tested positive for marijuana after winning the first Olympic snowboarding gold medal at the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano (Japan), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (temporarily) revoked his medal. With a reading of 17.8 nanograms of marijuana per millilitre (the World Skiing Federation permits no more than 15 nanograms per millilitre), Rebagliati argued that he must have inhaled second-hand smoke at a pre-Olympic Games party in Whistler. The IOC was unsympathetic to Rebagliati’s explanation and only returned his medal when his lawyers found a loophole — marijuana was not on the IOC’s list of banned substances. Not surprisingly, the incident grabbed headlines around the world. For many, the scandal was the source of much humour, for others it conﬁrmed the sport’s anti-authoritarian and counter-cultural roots and offered support for arguments — from snowboarders as well as many mainstream commentators — that snowboarding was not ready to become an Olympic sport (see Thorpe & Wheaton, in press). At the time of the Rebagliati debacle, many (including the Head of the Canadian Olympic Association) explicitly rejected the performance-enhancing potential of marijuana. More recently, however, Rebagliati (2009) has presented anecdotal evidence that suggests otherwise:

Of the hundred guys on tour in the early nineties, I’d say about half used marijuana more or less regularly, and of the female riders, somewhat fewer. I smoked weed on tour because it relaxed me . . . it also helped with extreme jet lag . . . Basically, it reduced the pressures of competing at an elite level, day, after day, after day. Yet I also knew that the FIS took drug testing pretty seriously, and to be sure my results would be clear by the Olympics, I’d smoked my last spliff in early April 1997. (p. 131)

Spokeswoman for The United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), Erin Hannan, recently conﬁrmed opinions expressed by Rebagliati, stating that marijuana may indeed ‘lower inhibitions, lower stress, and enable someone to perform at a level or perform feats that when not under the influence may not be as able to do so’ (cited in Higgins, 2010, para. 22).

As has long been the case in many other more traditional sports, the IOC and governing sporting bodies (e.g. USADA and FIS) are increasingly deﬁning the legitimate taste and lifestyle practices of competitive snowboarders. A few highly proficient snowboarders, such as Nate Bozung (see comment at the head of this paper), refuse to modify their lifestyles in order to participate in FIS-sanctioned
events, opting instead to pursue a career based on niche media coverage in magazines and films, but they are in the minority. As Bourdieu (1993) explains, ‘in order for a field to function, there have to be stakes and people prepared to play the game’, drawing upon embodied ‘knowledge and recognition of the immanent laws of the field, the stakes, and so on’ to do so (p. 72). In the contemporary context where snowboarding is a highly institutionalised and competitive sport, many elite athletes recognise the symbolic and economic capital or ‘stakes’ on offer within the field of high performance sport and thus accept (though often begrudgingly) the rules and regulations set by organising bodies (e.g. IOC and FIS) (Thomas, 2009). As Bob Klein, a former professional snowboarder and current snowboard agent, observes, with huge corporate sponsorships on offer, many competitive snowboarders are adopting more professional approaches: ‘it’s gotten a lot more serious in recent years...there’s a lot less [athletes] smoking weed’ (cited in Higgins, 2010, para. 15). The coach of the British Olympic Snowboarding Team concurs: ‘People think snowboarder’s [sic] smoke a lot of dope, party all the time and are always drinking in bars. But the actual professionals aren’t doing that at all’ (cited in Thompson, 2006, para. 6). Yet, there are still instances where the anti-establishment and hedonistic ethos inherent at the core of some of the snowboarding field occasionally clash with the strict, hierarchical, and disciplinary regimes of traditional sports organisations such as the IOC. For example, risque photos of US 2010 Olympic halfpipe bronze medallist Scotty Lago posing with a female fan at a post-event party, in which the female fan is captured kissing his medal held suggestively below his waist, caused public outcry. While the general public and mass media criticized Lago’s actions as unprofessional and decidedly un-Olympic, many core boarders celebrated his behaviour as evidence of the sport’s continued counter-cultural roots (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011).

‘Sex on the slopes’: physical prowess and sexuality in the snowboarding culture

A plethora of research has examined the psycho-physiological risks for youth engaging in regular or excessive alcohol and drug consumption (e.g. D’Amico, Edelen, Miles, & Morral, 2008; Plant & Plant, 1992). However, ‘issues of the body, of gender or sexual identities, of pleasure and agency’ are rarely fore-grounded in this research (Hunt, Moloney, & Evans, 2010, p. 174). Arguably, the relationship between physical, social, and sexual risk-taking and pleasure-seeking cannot be neatly separated in research on physical youth cultures such as snowboarding. As one committed Canadian male snowboarder proclaims, ‘snowboarding does have a “rock-n-roll” stigma to it, where sex, drugs and partying tend to accompany it’ (personal communication, 2008). Similarly, a New Zealand female snowboarder believes: ‘Snowboarding is a sport with lots of young people and an emphasis on the nightlife – it is already overtly sexual – so to deny that would be lying’ (personal communication, 2008). As with many other action sport cultures (see Evers, 2010; Laurendeau, 2004; Wheaton, 2003), hyper-heterosexuality is widely celebrated and enforced within the core snowboarding culture. Indeed, many bars and nightclubs in snow-sport destinations are highly sensuous and hyper-sexual spaces where ski and snowboard tourists, lifestyle sport migrants, and residents seek short-term social and physical pleasure. A core New Zealand male snowboarder describes some bars and nightclubs as ‘meat-markets’ where locals and tourists go to ‘get some loving’ (personal communication, 2008). For a Canadian male snowboarder,
‘casual sex and snowboarding go together like tea and crumpets ...’ Whistler is nicknamed “Club Bed” and Banff is the “STD capital of Canada”’. Continuing, he acknowledges the risks inherent in such interactions: ‘I lived up in Whistler for a few seasons and did a season in Banff. ... Most of my hook-ups were alcohol induced, but luckily I was smart enough to wrap it up [wear a condom], but some of my friends caught the clap [Chlamydia]’ (Bakesale, 2009).

A number of participants involved in this project also acknowledged the relationship between snowboarding physical prowess and risk-taking, and sexual desirability. For one Canadian male participant, female snowboarders who demonstrate skill and courage on the mountain gain ‘extra hot points’ (personal communication, 2007). A committed New Zealand male snowboarder also stated, ‘I think a woman who can ride a snowboard well is very sexy ... It’s something about the courage, focus, and disregard for safety ... and I just love the way women look in snow gear’ (personal communication, 2008). Some female participants offer similar sentiments:

Snowboarders are hot, physical prowess is hot, demonstrating finesse and grace and style is hot, hot, hot! It is all part of the allure, the adrenaline, the addiction. The most attractive aspect of a snowboarder is in their unique snowboarding style and how this is manifested in their riding. It is possible to find it alluring and sensual and satisfying to look at, without wanting to have sex with them. (Core New Zealand snowboarder, personal communication, 2006)

Interestingly, some of the young women interviewed for this project, confident in both their sexuality and physical prowess, also described gaining pleasure from being both voyeurs and (active) objects of the male gaze. As a professional female snowboarder from New Zealand put it, ‘guys are always checking out girls on the hill, and I like checking out the boys. I think it’s nice to be good to look at’ (Abby, personal communication, 2006). Similarly, Moriah, a core American boarder, proclaimed ‘to be honest, I love boys ... I really like it when I know they are checking me out on the mountain’ (personal communication, 2006). Continuing, she described drawing the attention of ‘cute boys’ via displays of physical prowess: ‘I love it when I ride up and [jump] over them. That makes it even better. Then they really like what they see’ (personal communication, 2006).

Many (though certainly not all) core female snowboarders readily engage in physical risk-taking on the mountain (see Thorpe, 2009), as well as hedonistic behaviours off the snow (i.e. alcohol and drug consumption, and/or regular sexual interactions with different partners). While the majority of female participants in this project proclaimed to make informed decisions regarding their risk-taking and pleasure-seeking behaviours both on and off the mountain, my observations reveal that their actions are never completely free but always constrained and enabled by the structural and ideological situation within the snowboarding field (also see Laurendeau, 2004; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998). For example, while completing fieldwork in Salt Lake City (Utah, USA) I was privy to scandalous conversations between a group of core male snowboarders, including two professional snowboarders and a photographer, which reduced professional female snowboarders to sexual objects. Snippets from the conversations included: ‘She’s probably the hottest female snowboarder and she rides really good but from what I hear, she gets a bit freaky in the bedroom;’ ‘she was sleeping on my floor and asked whether my bed was comfortable, I knew she wanted me to invite her in ... she really wanted it’; another professional female snowboarder was declared ‘a butch lesbian’ (field notes,
November 2005). In contrast to professional female snowboarders (though not dis-similar from ‘groupies’ in other sporting and music cultures), some women – also known as ‘pro-hos’ – enter the snowboarding field seeking sexual relations with professional male snowboarders rather than active participation. According to a core male snowboarder, ‘pro-hos just hang around trying to sleep with pro riders because they think it will make them cool-by-association and help them get into the good parties … most of them don’t even snowboard. All a pro-ho is good for is a suck off [oral sex]’ (personal communication, 2004). The circulation of rumours regarding the sexuality of top female snowboarders and the use of degrading language that reduces women to sexual objects are examples of ‘symbolic violence’ that work to remove any threat women’s sexual agency (or snowboarding prowess) may pose to the male-dominated hierarchical structure of the snowboarding field (Krais, 1993). Clearly, in many social fields, including the après snow culture, young women’s ‘sexual agency’ operates as a form of regulation (Gill, 2008; Harris, 2005; Tolman, 2002; Ussher, 2005). Regardless of changes within the snowboarding field and society more broadly, young women’s bodies, and their sexual and social pleasure-seeking practices, continue to be policed and monitored via an array of subtle and explicit practices and strategies employed by dominant groups (Hutton, 2004).

The snowboarding fratriarchy not only regulates the sexual tastes and practices of female snowboarders and cultural participants, it also has the potential to be violently homophobic (Thorpe, 2010b). ‘I hate to think what the young hard-core boarders would do to a [male] homosexual rider’, said Nick, an ex-core snowboarder, ‘I’m reasonably sure it would be abusive’ (personal communication, 2006; see Kimmel, 1994). Despite the prevalence of homophobia within the snowboarding fratriarchy, many gay men and lesbian women enjoy snowboarding and actively participate in the après snow culture. Indeed, gay ski weeks in major ski resort destinations attract thousands of boarders and skiers alike. To further support the participation of gay, lesbian, bi- and trans-sexual snowboarders, some have formed clubs and websites, such as Outryders (www.outryders.org) and OutBoard (www.outboard.com). The latter has almost 4000 members in 50 US states and 27 countries. While most participate on the margins of the culture (e.g. weekend warriors and novices), some gay snowboarders are actively negotiating space within the hyper-heterosexual snowboarding field. For example, in 2002, American snowboard racer Ryan Miller became the first professional snowboarder to declare his homosexual status. After many years of ‘making excuses’ and ‘putting up’ with the hyper-heterosexuality of his peers, Miller responded to an invite from his male teammates to visit a local strip club by stating matter-of-factly, ‘I’m not into that … I’m gay’. According to Miller, the initial response from teammates and the industry was ‘colder than a Canadian winter’; ‘invitations to social events dried up, the camaraderie ended’ and he was ‘basically shunned’ by both his peers and snowboarding companies ‘not eager to be associated with an openly gay snowboarder’ (cited in Buzinski, 2002, para. 10). Despite experiencing marginalisation from some of his peers, Miller is ‘out and proud’ and clearly displays stickers from a variety of gay organisations (e.g. Team Flame, an organisation for gay elite athletes) on his snowboard; Miller also manages Outboard events and operations with his husband. In sum, while young, ‘core’ heterosexual men continue to hold the dominant position in the snowboarding field, and thus the most power to define and regulate legitimate practices of sex and sexuality, some snowboarders are challenging (il)legitimate tastes and lifestyles from within the snowboarding field.
Conclusion
In this paper, I engaged Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction in dialogue with an array of primary and secondary sources gathered over a seven-year period to examine the pleasure-seeking tastes and practices of various groups of snowboarders, and particularly young committed snowboarders. More specifically, I presented a thematic sketch of the hedonistic party lifestyle, alcohol and drug consumption (for both pleasure and performance), and the hyper-sexuality, at the core of the snowboarding culture. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s concepts of field, practice, and taste, I revealed the definitions of pleasure and the hedonistic snowboarding lifestyle as highly contested; some groups have more power to regulate and control the legitimate tastes and lifestyles of snowboarders than others. While many cultural participants are complicit to hierarchical and/or violent attempts to regulate the dominant tastes and practices within the snowboarding field, some are practicing what Bourdieu (1991) refers to as ‘regulated liberties’ and engaging in alternative lifestyle and taste practices (e.g. Torah Bright’s refusal to consume alcohol or drugs at snowboarding events; Ryan Miller’s openly homosexual status), and in so doing, are actively challenging assumptions regarding the legitimate use of the boarding body. Some snowboarders also continue to resist attempts by local and national authorities, the mass media, and sporting institutions, to regulate their taste practices (e.g. Nate Bozung’s refusal to cease his marijuana usage in order to participate in FIS-sanctioned snowboarding competitions). As this paper has revealed, an array of individuals, social groups, and organisations, both within and outside the snowboarding field, are engaging in a variety of symbolic and embodied struggles to (re)define meanings of ‘pleasure’ in the après snow culture and snowboarding lifestyle, as well as other social and sporting fields (e.g. high-performance sport). I look forward to future research that builds upon this preliminary investigation to further explore the social and physical pleasures and pains, risks and constraints, power relations, and agency and reflexivity, of male and female participants in contemporary physical youth cultures. While Bourdieu’s work has rarely been used to explore the symbolic and embodied politics involved in defining legitimate pleasure-seeking tastes and practices in sport and physical cultures, I suggest that his conceptual schema may offer a potentially fruitful way forward as we continue to explore the opportunities and constraints facing contemporary youth seeking new spaces for, and sources of, self-expression and pleasure in their everyday lives.

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Notes
1. A notable exception, however, is Evers’ (2010) extensive work on the hedonistic lifestyles and social and physical risk-taking of young male Australian surfers.
2. Despite some common practices and philosophies across these cultures, it is important to note that the use of drugs and alcohol, and the social interactions of participants are unique to each physical youth culture and vary within and across different spaces and
places and over time, depending on an array of factors (e.g. the distinct physical and social environments where participants practice and perform their activity and interact with their peers; local, regional, and national laws regarding the use of drugs and alcohol in various spaces and places; accessibility and cost of drugs and alcohol; and trends in broader popular culture and other youth, music and physical cultures, etc.).

3. As the snowboarding culture has become increasingly divided, the relations between skiers and snowboarders have also shifted. Whereas cultural differences divided early skiers and snowboarders (Humphreys, 1996), today many skiers, particularly young skiers, are drawing inspiration from the styles of participation, technologies, jargon and fashion of freestyle snowboarders. This trend is filtering into the broader alpine snow culture, such that in most North American and Australasian resorts, and many European destinations, style of participation (i.e. freestyle, big mountain, and alpine) is the primary divide with skiers and snowboarders increasingly sharing terrain as well as styles of talk and dress, training methods, and lifestyles.

4. I suggest now that this ‘silence’ in my early work (and perhaps many other studies of youth-dominated action sport cultures), was due to a (subconscious) fear that the hedonistic practices and performances of snowboarders in bars and nightclubs did not warrant legitimate intellectual inquiry.

5. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions, I selected participants with whom I had already established rapport and a trusting relationship. I also invited participants who had previously demonstrated an ability to reflect upon, and articulate, their experiences in the snowboarding culture, and an expressed interest in further involvement in this project.

6. During these phases of fieldwork, I observed, listened, engaged in analysis and made mental notes, switching from snowboarder to researcher depending on the requirements of the situation. Of course, the covert nature of some aspects of these participant-observation phases raises many ethical issues (Sands, 2008; Wheaton, 2002). While all participants have the right to know when their behaviour is being observed for research purposes, in some situations it was not feasible (or, indeed, safe) to declare my researcher identity or ask for informed consent from all participants (e.g. at a big air snowboarding event with thousands of young, intoxicated spectators). Engaging in ‘situated ethics’, I negotiated my way through the various social situations differently depending on the dynamics of the interactions and my role in the relations (Simons & Usher, 2000; Wheaton, 2002). For a more detailed discussion of my methodological approach and the ethical issues that emerged during my fieldwork, see Thorpe (2011).

7. Adopting what Munslow (2006) terms a ‘constructionist approach’, in this project I privilege neither theory nor empiricism, instead inferring answers from questions I ‘put to the evidence and not from the sources, which cannot speak for themselves’ (p. 49). Adopting such an approach allowed a certain degree of creativity and reflexivity in which theory and empirical work intertwined and informed each other throughout the various phases of this study of global snowboarding culture, and the hedonistic snowboarding lifestyle more specifically.

8. While the pleasurable dimensions of sport often go overlooked by critical sport scholars, some are adopting Foucauldian approaches to examine the complex relationship between power, pleasure, desire, pain, and discipline in sports such as Ironman triathlon (Bridel, 2010), ultra-running (Hanold, 2010), and rugby (Pringle, 2009).

9. Of course, the use of recreational drugs and alcohol consumption varies within and across different snowboarding destinations. For example, Whistler (British Columbia, Canada) is well known for its relaxed laws regarding marijuana use, and the drug is frequently and openly consumed on the mountain – e.g. ‘hot boxing’ the gondola is a common practice among skiers and snowboarders alike – and in various public spaces (e.g. bus stops). In contrast, snowboarders living in Salt Lake City (Utah) employ an array of highly creative strategies to access full strength alcohol and navigate the stringent laws established and regulated by the Mormon culture.

Notes on contributor
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